

Holding religious institutions to account for child abuse

We are working at national and [international level](#) to highlight failings in religious organisations' response to child (mainly sexual) abuse. Religious organisations' privilege, their often close relationship with the establishment and tendencies to see themselves above the law, have prevented abusers from facing secular justice.

What's the problem?

Religious organisations are more prone to abuse than most others and are often better placed to cover it up. Those intent on abuse are attracted to such organisations giving access to, and often extreme control over, numerous young people and vulnerable adults. These organisations are generally large enough to move a perpetrator whose abuse has been discovered to somewhere unaware of their reputation. The institutions generally also have standing, influence and connections that frequently enable them to evade secular justice, often for decades.

Practically no major religious sect is immune. The highest known incidence of abuse relates to the Roman Catholic Church –partly because of the number of residential establishments they run. This has been especially in Australia, Ireland and the USA, and to a lesser extent in the UK, where abuse in the Anglican Church is repeatedly being uncovered. It is likely that there is significant unrecorded abuse in minority religions and sects, which tend to be particularly secretive, controlling and enclosed. While most of the abuse known of is in developed "western" countries with relatively free media, it is anticipated that abuse is as prevalent, if not more so, elsewhere in the world - not least because recidivist abusers in the West are often sent abroad.

The Catholic Church is a special case

The Roman Catholic Church's control from the Vatican, a sovereign state, allows it literally to be a law unto itself and it requires incriminating evidence to be sent there where it is beyond reach of legal agencies elsewhere in the world.

Such is the trauma of abuse that this has a materially negative impact on victims'/survivors' mental health and ability to trust others and form relationships, and they frequently resort to drugs and self-harm. These often lead to ruined lives, not infrequently also for multiple generations of the family.

The self-regulation of safe-guarding is rarely effective as it is too prone to institutional pressures to protect abusers from justice, thereby avoiding scandal and a greater chance of financial settlements.

Any reporting to external agencies is generally not for many years, but most jurisdictions have statutes of limitations for civil and even criminal cases. Civil cases in particular frequently fail for this reason. In a few countries, not yet in the UK, it is a criminal offence not to report suspicions of institutional abuse.

Lawyers engaged in helping clerical abuse victims tell us that, despite warm words of regret and apology from the institutions of whatever religion or denomination, even when guilt is as clear as it could be, religious organisations still resort to every tactic to resist paying compensation.

What are we doing?

- We have worked at a strategic level at the United Nations. We accused the Vatican at the Human Rights Council of breaking multiple articles of the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).
- Our subsequent work with the Committee for the Rights of the Child resulted in its first examination of the Catholic Church's record on clerical child abuse by the Committee. Its devastating critique made headline news around the world. We continue to raise abuse issues with the UN when country's records are under scrutiny as part of a rolling programme.
- In the UK we have given evidence to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) on the particular problems of clerical abuse. We have given evidence to the police and to the Independent Peter Ball Review into a former Anglican bishop, since jailed, who abused minors and vulnerable adults and evading justice for decades as a result of a massive establishment cover up.
- NSS vice president Richard Scorer, also a lawyer at Slater and Gordon, has represented survivors of Church of England clerical abuse at IICSA. His opening statements and commentary of the inquiry and other clerical abuse cases can be read [here](#).
- Since 2011 our executive director Keith Porteous Wood has been the International Association of Free Thought (IAFT) spokesperson on institutional religious child abuse.
- We work with, inform and assist where possible journalists working on complex abuse cases. We maintain close liaisons with lawyers specialising in abuse cases.

What you can do:

[I support the NSS's work to ensure victims of institutional clerical child abuse have access to secular justice.](#)

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Watch this space

We don't have any campaign actions to highlight at the moment. Please check back soon. See our page on the UNCRC (below), for information on upcoming reviews of countries with issues of institutional religious child abuse.

More information

- [The UN Committee for the Rights of the Child](#)

The UNCRC reviews each country's record every five years, when they have to submit a report. This has been an effective avenue for challenging states complicit in institutional

religious child abuse.

[Read More](#)

- [IAFT 2017 Congress: child abuse in religious settings](#) (PDF, 357 Kb)

Keith Porteous Wood's speech on our international work on clerical child abuse, what has been learned, and what more can be done at local, national and international levels.

- [Vatican stung by NSS child abuse allegations at UN](#)

Speaking at the United Nations Human Rights Council on 22 September 2009, the Executive Director of the National Secular Society accused the Roman Catholic Church of covering up child abuse in ways that permitted it to be perpetuated. It is thought that this is the first time the Vatican has been directly criticised on the floor of the UNHRC.

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- [NSS Director challenges Vatican at UN over failure to tackle child abuse](#)

The Executive Director of the National Secular Society, Keith Porteous Wood, launched a ferocious attack this week [16 March 2010] on the Pope and the Vatican's record on child abuse at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva.

[Read More](#)

- [Vatican accused of flouting UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

At the plenary session of the United Nations Human Rights Council on Tuesday 15 March 2011, Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society accused the Holy See of contravening its duties under the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in relation to child abuse.

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